

St. Anthony's School: A School Not Forgotten

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You may not recognize the Catholic schools today since something seems to be missing-- the nuns. Nuns were the first educators in the Catholic schools. However, today we see mostly lay teachers, and maybe a nun here or there.

In Beckemeyer, Illinois, a town not far from where I live stood a church and school called St. Anthony. On October 2, 1905, Reverend Joseph J. Hoellmann, (the first pastor) was given instructions to immediately create a building which would include a church and school. Records indicate that the ground was purchased from John G. Taphorn and Louisa Taphorn. The building was quickly built. As a result, the church/school was officially dedicated on December 21, 1905.

The church was a two-story building. The school occupied the first floor, while the second floor was for celebrating Mass and prayer services. The estimated building cost, including furniture, was \$17,753.34. The school was divided into three rooms.

The Sisters of the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ were the first teachers at St. Anthony's School, which officially opened on January 2, 1906. Enrollment began with approximately 125 students. The teachers included Sister Kineburga, Sister M. Leonara, and Sister M. Isabella. Another important educator at St. Anthony's Catholic School was Sister Barbara Bruns. She remained active in the teaching staff and role of principal for years until the school closed in 1994. In a previous documented interview, Sister Burns stated, "I love children and find it a tremendous challenge to help them learn, build self-esteem and healthy attitudes and values. My deep hope and prayer is that they will grow

in their relationship with God.” Sister Barbara Bruns taught until 2003 when she retired from Mater Dei High School in Breese, Illinois.

Since the school was Catholic, St. Anthony was faith based. For this reason, families sent their children to receive a solid religious education. Parents noted that they liked the freedom to choose their child’s education. Teachers at the school noted, “We liked the freedom to pray and celebrate the eucharistic liturgy with our students; freedom to speak freely of God in their classrooms; freedom to remind students of their dignity as children of the Heavenly Father; freedom to guide their students to a deeper and fuller Christ-centered life; and freedom to prepare their students to face existence in two worlds-here and hereafter.” This faith-based education continues in our Catholic schools today.

Many of my relatives attended St. Anthony’s School, including both of my grandmothers, my aunt, and my father. Recently, I spoke to them about their school experiences. They explained they felt they received an excellent education at St. Anthony’s. My grandmother loved the fact that I was writing about her old school and she was more than willing to share any information she could remember. She explained to me that, “Everything I learned in Religion back then is still with me today.” One of my grandmothers graduated in the year 1945 and the other in 1952. Both my aunt and my father graduated in 1972.

All of the individuals interviewed noted that they enjoyed the school immensely. The classes were challenging and they spoke of nothing but positive experiences while attending St. Anthony. My grandmothers spoke of plays that each class performed. Aunt Peggy noted that even though class sizes were very small, everyone got along well.

My father indicated the hot lunch program did not begin until 1971. Before that, students brought brown bag lunches, or the town children went home to eat. As they talked about fond memories, they were most thankful for their religious foundation that they received at St. Anthony.

The cost of tuition must have been different at different time periods. My grandmother told me the tuition was free when she attended the school, because many families were very poor. In an interview with Sister Bruns, she stated, “St. Anthony’s was not a wealthy parish, so tuition was kept to \$400.00 a year per family.”

As a result of decreased enrollment, increased finances and the need for extensive renovation, St. Anthony closed its doors in 1994. At the time of the closing, there were 80 students, with four teachers on staff. A special ceremony was held for students, parents, teachers, and the faith-based community on June 5, 1994, to celebrate its present and past memories. St. Anthony’s School joined with All Saints Academy in Breese, Illinois, in the fall of 1994.

On February 27, 1997, three years after the school closed, demolition of the school building began. As a special memory of the physical building, my grandmother had the opportunity to obtain a brick. For others who were not so lucky, memories will continue in the hearts of those that had the opportunity to attend.

In remembrance of the school, a prayer to St. Anthony was written. It read, “St. Anthony Patron of Our Parish and our school, finder of misplaced things, help us find ourselves, and in our search for Christian education for our youth. Thanks, dear friend for the guidance through ninety years, and please dear saint, stay with us.” The building of St. Anthony’s School was awarded a landmark plaque by the Clinton County

Historical Society for 1981. [From Breese Journal, Dec. 16, 1982; Clinton County Historical Society, quarterly newsletter, vol: 20, no. 3 (July-Sept. 1997); student historian's interview with Stephanie Garcia (author's teacher), Oct. 24, 2005; student historian's interview with Peggy Gebke (former St. Anthony's student), Sept. 30, 2005; student historian's interview with Ruth Gebke (former St. Anthony's student), Oct. 12, 2005; student historian's interview with Evelyn Johnson (former St. Anthony's student), Oct. 3, 2005; student historian's interview with Kenneth Johnson, (former St. Anthony's student), Oct. 1, 2005; "The 1913 Commercial History of Clinton County, Illinois, Beckemeyer" <http://www.rootweb.com/~ilclint2/commer/beck.htm> (Sept. 13, 2005); Poor Handmaids Magazine, 1973; St. Anthony's Church Bulletin, June 5, 1994; "The 1913 Commercial History of Clinton County Illinois, Beckemeyer" <http://www.rootsweb.com/~ilclint2/commer/beck.htm> (Sept. 13, 2005); and unidentified newspaper, January 29, 1978.]